

CHARLIE CHAPLIN & BUSTER KEATON COMIC ANTIHERO EXTREMES DURING THE 1920S

CHARLIE CHAPLIN Y BUSTER KEATON LOS DOS EXTREMOS DEL ANTIHÉROE CÓMICO DURANTE LOS AÑOS VEINTE

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In pantomime, strolling players use incomprehensible language... not for what it means but for the sake of life. [writer, actor, director Leon] Chancerel is quite right to insist upon the importance of mime. The body in the theatre... (Camus, 1962, p. 199).

Abstract: The essay is a revisionist look at James Agee's famous article "Comedy's Greatest Era" –keying on Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin– 'the comedy auteurs' of the 1920s. However, while Chaplin was the giant of the era, period literature showcases that Keaton was a popular but more cult-like figure. (See my forthcoming book: *Buster Keaton in his own time*, McFarland Press). However, Keaton is now considered on a par with Chaplin. While the inspired comedy of Chaplin will be forever timeless, Keaton now seems to speak to today. At least

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during this decade, Chaplin embraces the emotional humanistic heart of a Dickens past, while Keaton ponders the cerebral existentialism of a Camus, or Beckett. Life is messy but for Chaplin, art is where you get it right... if for only 90 minutes. Keaton's message/reminder is that life is chaos.... a rough cut "movie" that just stops. Or, as Kafka observed, "The meaning of life is that it ends". Truly two perspectives to ponder.

Keywords: Charles Chaplin, Buster Keaton, James Agee, hero, anti-hero, comedy, heart, existentialism, meaning of life.

Resumen: El ensayo es una mirada revisionista del famoso artículo de James Agee "La época más grande de la comedia" —centrándose en Buster Keaton y Charlie Chaplin, "los autores de la comedia cinematográfica" de la década de 1920—. Por más que Chaplin fuese considerado el gigante de la época, la literatura del momento mostraba que Keaton no solo era considerado una figura popular, sino también más culta (cf. mi próximo libro: *Buster Keaton en su propio tiempo*, McFarland Press). En cambio, en los estudios actuales Keaton es considerado ya en la misma categoría que Chaplin. Mientras que la comedia inspirada por Chaplin se considera por siempre intemporal, Keaton nos parece ahora que habla para el día de hoy. Al menos durante esta década, Chaplin abraza el corazón humanista emocional de un pasado al estilo de Dickens, mientras que Keaton reflexiona sobre el existencialismo cerebral de un Camus o de un Beckett. La vida es confusa, pero para Chaplin, el arte es lo que consigue enderezarla, al menos durante noventa minutos. El mensaje o el recordatorio de Keaton es que la vida es un caos... una áspera "película" que finalmente termina. O, como Kafka observó, "el significado de la vida es que termina". Verdaderamente dos perspectivas para reflexionar.

Palabras clave: Charles Chaplin, Buster Keaton, James Agee, héroe, antihéroe, comedia, corazón, existencialismo, sentido de la vida.

One cannot find two more either unique or different antiheroic types in American cinema than Charlie Chaplin (1889-1977) and Buster Keaton (1895-1966) during the 1920s. However, before addressing this remarkable duo, beyond their pointedly different perspectives, one must footnote the decade with pioneering film critic James Agee's 1949 essay, "Comedy's Greatest Era" (1949). This critique jump-started the serious study of silent com-



edy and created a 1920's pantheon of four: Chaplin, Keaton, Harold Lloyd (1893-1971), and Harry Langdon (1884-1944). Besides being a boon to a then neglected era of film comedy study, it began the overdue resurrection of the tragically neglected Keaton –the Lincoln-esque “Great Stone Face”. As notable as the essay was, it did, however, almost imply a parity among the four in many subsequent works. Nothing could have been further from the truth. Chaplin and Keaton were true auteurs, starring in and directing their films, though Keaton did not always take a credit. Moreover, the subtext to their cinema embraced pivotal philosophical perspectives about modern man.

In contrast, Lloyd was a comic by committee, creating reels of diverting mind candy. Ironically, nonetheless, he was the decade's comedy box office champion for several reasons. While Chaplin let years pass between productions, Lloyd was the most prolific funnyman in the business. In addition, his cinema was the most gag-saturated of the group –created by his army of writers. Moreover, his persona of an underdog Mama's boy who eventually makes good unintentionally matched the satire-drenched world of contemporary novelist Sinclair Lewis' “Babbitt” bourgeoisie– what critic H. L. Mencken called “booboisie” America. Now, while still amusing, it seems more like a comic era preserved in amber. However, while he did not have the brilliant comic intuition of Chaplin and Keaton, Lloyd had a firm handle on the innate boundaries of his screen alter ego, which is obvious in his 1928 memoir, *An American Comedy* (Lloyd & Stout, 1928). This is no small accomplishment, because it is not enough to just be funny. Consistency allows the comedian to create a singularity viewers come to expect and return to see again and again in a variation of the same pattern.

Indeed, this lack of an undeviating constancy was what contributed to the decline of Harry Langdon even before the coming of sound. Plus, Langdon was so late to the feature-length comedy table, he should never have been invited to sit with the aforementioned trio. Chaplin and Keaton were capable of wearing several creative hats (in fact, the creator of the Tramp was a whole haberdashery), and Lloyd was good at delegating authority to his clown pose. However, Langdon caught what film historians have come to call “the Chaplin disease”. That is, after Frank Capra helped create a very successful baby persona who survived only by the grace of God (with a template draw-



ing from the literary persona of Jaroslav Hasek's novel *The Good Soldier Schwejk*, 1921-1923), the comedian egotistically failed his attempt to go it alone even before sound (1971). With the then sudden end to his "A" picture career, Langdon returned to vaudeville and later met a comedian on his way up, Bob Hope. In one of Hope's many later memoirs, 1977's *The Road to Hollywood*, he shared:

One day between shows, Langdon told me: "Young man, if you ever go out to Hollywood and become a star –and I think you could– don't make my mistake. Don't try to convince yourself that you're a genius" (Hope & Thomas, 1977, p. 12).

Keaton, paradoxically, now considered Chaplin's only artistic rival in the 1920s, was popular then but he was neither credited with reaching the aesthetic heights of Charlie's iconic Tramp, nor the period turnstile magic of Lloyd, despite the "Great Stone Face" being equally productive during the 1920s, too. Fittingly, for the tale which is about to be told, Keaton's reviews were sometimes even cultish, such as when he falls in love with "Brown Eyes" the cow in *Go West* (1926). In contrast, a typical Lloyd review often opened along the lines of: "I don't know why I'm even critiquing this picture, his films are always funny". Still, at the time, Chaplin was essentially a cinema god. For example, the title of a 1924 *Los Angeles Times* article worshipfully says it all: "Chaplin Shows [the] Art of Pictures [a] Century Hence" (1924)¹.

So what were the 1920s extreme differences between Chaplin and Keaton's anti-heroes, and how has the latter artist come roaring back to rival this genius? Chaplin's antihero is a mix of comedy and pathos, a moving exercise in secular humanism –trying to make sense of life's emotional and/or intellectual experience. For the Tramp, the key human action is sacrifice, even when that means letting go of love because it is the right thing to do, such as in the close of 1928's *The Circus*. There was pain but also resiliency, as he shook it off and proceeded to shuffle away with what poet Carl Sandburg christened those "east-west feet". Moreover, that sacrifice never plays as a lesson. May-

¹ In fact, Chaplin's ability to write, direct, perform, produce and compose the music for one groundbreaking picture after another over 50-plus years remains unprecedented.



be this is Chaplin's greatest gift –what the later *New Yorker* critic Anthony Lane called the challenge the comedian most relished– “How to make an adventure out of a sermon?” (2005, p. 106). In the 1920s Chaplin's antihero still embraced optimism. And even if a twist in life seems either impossible to comprehend, or inconceivable to accomplish, such as raising an abandoned baby in 1921's *The Kid*, it still behooves one to try.

In a big picture perspective on art there are basically two views, which one might call clarity and chaos. Chaplin, at least during the 1920s, embraced the first. That is, life is messy and ambiguous. The individual constantly feels rudderless. The clarity perspective, to paraphrase Woody Allen's antiheroic stage director near the close of 1977's *Annie Hall*, says, “Art is where you get it right”. You make sense of it, if only for the length of a movie. There is comfort in that ... whether it is true or not. That is Chaplin in the Jazz Age.

The chaos perspective, in film terms, says life is a rough cut which will end with sudden unfinished finality. There is no comfort in this, and art should remind people that life is chaos, not an attempt to comfort them with a lie about clarity. This is the antihero world of 1920s Keaton. A signature sequence along these lines for the Great Stone Face occurs in *Daydreams* (1922). In this metaphor for the treadmill nature of life, Keaton is caught in a whirling riverboat paddle, and walks ever faster to avoid becoming a victim. It is life in an eternal holding pattern, like the two clowns forever killing time in *Waiting for Godot*, or Lewis Carroll's Alice running faster and faster to just stay put in *Wonderland*. In anticipating the Theatre of the Absurd, Keaton's antihero is about questioning, not comforting, the mind. He invites a cerebral pondering of existence itself. Keaton is the essence of dark comedy absurdity, in which his contemporary Kafka embraces the same mantra “The meaning of life is that you die”. Even more to the point, to paraphrase Albert Camus, “we need to be pulled out of our happy barbarism”.

Keaton's most famous nickname fits this dark worldview perfectly –the “Great Stone Face”. In a dangerous world it is not safe to reveal one's emotion. A poker face represents security, as does another basic rule –avoid involvement. The humanistic sacrifice of Chaplin's Tramp, who also goes by the interactively friendly nickname of “Charlot”, only invites possible pain... and even potential harm for whomever one attempts to help. Keaton's nihil-



ism has also invited other nicknames, such as Spain's somewhat softening of this dark philosophy by calling him "Pamplinas" –nonsense. Of course, I have always associated that twilight tag with a darker American expression of the 1920s: "a whole lot of nothing". Certainly that axiom jells with Keaton's more common period nickname in various European countries – "Zero".

Maybe more coherence can be showcased by a broader example involving a shared goal with humanist Chaplin and the paint-by-number Lloyd –the theme of love. For Chaplin there is the promise of love at the close of *The Kid*, when he is reunited with Jackie Coogan's title character, after the cop brings him to the boy's new home –with his biological mother Edna Purviance. Chaplin's "Little Fellow" seems embraced not only by Edna and Jackie but metaphorically by the entrance of the home itself. It is reminiscent of the part one conclusion of *Birth of Nation* (1915, a film which Chaplin had seen repeatedly when it opened). The sequence in question has the "Little Colonel" (Henry B. Walthall) returning from the Civil War and also metaphorically being embraced by house and household.

Moving on to *The Gold Rush*, the Tramp eventually wins the love of the saloon girl Georgia (Georgia Hale) by sheer persistence. And though she is a more worldly woman than Chaplin's norm, it is her streetwise maturity which eventually succumbs to his child-like devotion. And while he does not get the girl in *The Circus*, he gives her up as an act of love, almost like a parent –knowing intuitively what is best for her. Charlie even orchestrates the girl's marriage and then leaves the circus in which the young woman and her new husband are performing, wisely recognizing it would be too awkward. *The Kid*, *The Gold Rush*, and *The Circus* all show the Tramp pointed towards either the hope of future happiness or at least a demonstration of sacrificial love for another's happiness. With a Lloyd scenario it is always a telegraphed ending of love and happiness, such as the concluding stroll with his screen bride-to-be (Mildred Davis) in *Safety Last* (1923). Indeed, it was such a given for Lloyd, that leading lady Davis even became the comedian's wife in real life. Again, it is pleasant mind candy escapism, without the nuances of emotions emulating from the Tramp.

In contrast, the hollowness of relationships for Keaton's "Zero" character is best illustrated by the concluding of *College* (1927), which seems to follow



a pattern not that different from many 1920s university comedies, such as Lloyd's *The Freshman* (1925). That is, both comedians fail at athletic events until a miraculous finale which allows them to win the day. Thus, *College* seems to end like a Lloyd template, with Keaton and leading lady Anne Cornwall happily leaving a church after a marriage ceremony.

This would be the cheery close to any number of Lloyd pictures, and one expects as much here, since Keaton had seemingly been following his fellow comedian's formula. However, Keaton had been losing control of his career at this point, and *College* had not been something he wanted to do. Thus, one has several reels of funny yet not typically inspired Keaton shtick until that surprising close, in which he cuts off all that budding happiness at the knees. That is, one dissolves from a happily married couple, to a more than frustrated pair of parents overwhelmed by their children. Next, one dissolves to them as an old arguing couple. Finally, one has a concluding dissolve of two tombstones. This is a visit to Samuel Beckett-like existentialism years before 1953's *Godot*.

Moreover, life's pointlessness for Keaton is hardly limited to *College*. It is peppered throughout his filmography, such as his tombstone conclusion to *Cops* (1922). In this latter film he gives himself up to death with as little emotion as the title character in Albert Camus' *The Stranger* (1942). Indeed, if the central paradox for Camus is that even a passible life is rendered meaningless by death, Keaton's films frequently showcase an absurd life which is only amusingly relevant for *viewers*... not Mr. "Zero". In fact, Camus might later have been speaking for both himself *and* Keaton when he said of his personal and professional life:

I have only ever been happy and at peace when engaged in a ... task ... And my work is solitary. I must accept that ... But I cannot avoid a sense of melancholy when I find myself with those who are happy with what they are doing (Hughes, 2015, p. 124).

It is hardly coincidental that while Agee's essay put Keaton's antihero back in play, it was not until the 1960s that film critics were putting him on a par with Chaplin's Tramp. Why was this? Though many factors led to this less than serendipitous event, one might boil them down to the release of Stanley



Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove: Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964). While black humor had always existed, this is the film which made it acceptable fodder to be drawn to center stage American cinema². Therefore, with dark comedy and absurdity being Keaton's antihero m.o., his work was suddenly being seen as timely, while Chaplin's Dickensque 1920s antihero, drawn from a true Dickensque childhood, had the creator of the Tramp seeming more derivative of the past.

The irony here is that Chaplin's "Little Fellow" had entered a progressively darker world in the 1930s and 1940s, which had helped make way for *Dr. Strangelove*³. Indeed, even with *Shoulder Arms* (1918) and *The Gold Rush*, Chaplin's Tramp had dealt with war and the threat of cannibalism. But his broad humor mixed with poignant pieces of time, like *The Gold Rush*'s "Dance of the Dinner Rolls", or sacrificing love for the greater good, had made his screen alter ego Teflon Tramp –able to avoid controversy. In contrast, Keaton's "Zero" had always been based in parody, and by the time of *Go West* and *The General* (1927), the comedian was embracing what is called "reaffirmation parody"⁴. Spoofs of this type are not so obvious. They are often confused with the genre being undercut. This could be exemplified by 1969's *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. A Western, yes, but... Paul Newman's likable outlaw had never killed anyone, always had run from "high noon" type shootouts, and could not even shoo away the tethered horses of the posse chasing them.

Reaffirmation parody risked this more subtle form of burlesque going over an audience's head. Thus, the humor of Buster's cow-loving antihero in *Go West* was missed by much of its original audience, such as *Photoplay*'s period review of the film: "Hardly a comedy because hardly a laugh. Yet the picture is very interesting" (1926). Moreover, the reception of Keaton antiheroic train engineer in *The General* leaned even further on reaffirmation parody. Though

² See the author's *American Dark Comedy: Beyond Satire* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1976).

³ See the author's award-winning book *CHAPLIN'S WAR TRILOGY: An Evolving Lens in Three Dark Comedies, 1918-1947* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland Press, 2014). *Huffington Post* selected it as one of the Best Film Books of 2014.

⁴ See the author's *Parody as Film Genre* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999).



now often considered the comedian's most significant film, the seriousness with which he often played his part made it seem more like a straight adventure film. Worse yet for its 1920s audiences, Buster's dark comedy often negated sympathy for his antihero. For instance, at one point Keaton pulls out his sword, and the saber portion separates from the handle and shish kabobs an enemy sniper.

Death on screen for 1920s comedy did not go over well, especially when it involved America's most traumatic war, with some veterans still alive. Thus, with regard to *The General*, even Keaton's most perceptive period critic, Robert Sherwood, said in his 1927 *LIFE* review, "... someone should have told Buster that it is difficult to derive laughter from the sight of men being killed in battle" (1927). *Photoplay*'s closing comment was even more biting: "We mustn't neglect to add that the basic incidents of 'The General' actually happened" (1927). Naturally, the modern viewer wants to shout, "That's the point of dark comedy!" Regardless, one should add that Keaton's trademark minimalist face would only have made the veiled seriousness of the comedian's period "reaffirmation parody" seem all the more somber. Moreover, even when Chaplin later completely embraced dark comedy in 1940's *The Great Dictator*, playing both the Hitler-inspired title character and the Tramp-like little Jewish barber, one still never saw anyone die on screen.

While the dark comedy of Keaton's *The General* proved to be too far ahead of its time, one aspect of his antihero was quite contemporary with the literacy humorists of his ilk, such as James Thurber, Robert Benchley, and S. J. Perelman –the battle of the sexes. These antihero writers could only play at being rough, à la Thurber's later "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty". In contrast, Keaton had no difficulty, at least in this film, in using his heroine as a prop, or worse. Thus, this comedian was nowhere near Chaplin's Victorian romantic rule of idealizing his 1920s heroine. Thus, one aspect of *The General* enjoyed by the period *New Yorker* critic was Keaton's rough and tumble ways with his leading lady, Marian Mack:

She is terribly inefficient, and her attempts to be of service during emergencies are all dismal failures ... but on top of that departure from the standard, the girl is subjected to a mass of indignities. She is tied in a sack and put where stevedores [manual laborers] throw barrels and packing cases on



top of her. The hero chokes her after one of her little blunders, and when she perpetuates an act of considerable stupidity he hurls a log of wood at her (*The New Yorker*, 1927, p. 51).

Though Keaton's *General* unruly behavior towards women was atypical for his antihero, traditional plot-driven heroines were seldom significant to his "Zero" figure. After all, his screen alter ego cared more for *Go West*'s cow, just as he preferred the title character locomotive of *The General*. Yet, even if he had always been heroine rough, the absurdity to be found in his films, either violent or otherwise, would have been consistent with the vaudeville act in which he had grown up. The seemingly indestructible "Buster" had been used by parents –primarily his dad– in the most physically brutal of turns, like The Three Stooges on steroids. There was much hitting and breaking of objects, particularly furniture, between father and son. However, the pièce de résistance core of "The Three Keatons" involved throwing the boy about, with the key to the program's humor being young Keaton maintaining that seemingly unnatural resistance to pain symbolized by that stone face. This forerunner to the theatre of the absurd environment is best explained in a 1927 *Photoplay* article by the comedian's father:

His mother and I had a burlesque acrobatic set in which my wife and I threw Buster about the stage like a human medicine ball. [This sometimes involved literally tossing him into the crowd, especially if there was a heckler.] One night in Syracuse, New York, father Joe told Buster: "Stiffen yourself, son". Catching him by a valise-handle-like contraption we had fastened between his shoulders, I gave him a fling. The next instance Buster's hip pocket flattened the nose of that troublemaker in the front row (Keaton, 1927, p. 124).

As a footnote to this tall tale-sounding article, an attached handle with which to throw a person, albeit a small one, at other people might sound like a fabrication. Yet, in American college football of the late 19th and early 20th century quarterbacks were also outfitted with handles with which to gain yardage by being thrown over the line of scrimmage. (The forward pass had yet to be invented –or had it?) Regardless, it was not until President Theodore Roosevelt convened a 1905 White House conference on college football to



address the rising number of gridiron *deaths* that the “handle” practice was phased out. However, this ban did not apply to vaudeville, and the undersized Buster would continue to be a human projectile for another decade. This living missile was truly a “clockwork orange”, part human and part machine.

Keaton later poo-pooed much subtextual thought being put into his anti-heroic films. However, the comedian’s memoir (whose very title acts as a misdirection, *My Wonderful World of Slapstick*), and other 1920s quotes suggest at least an intuitive anticipation of existentialism (Keaton, 1960). For example, in a November 25, 1922, interview with Great Britain’s *Picture Show* magazine, Keaton observed, “If you want to make people laugh you must weep, or at least be in enough trouble to make you entitled to weep”. Keep in mind that in Albert Camus later existentialistic primer, *The Plague* (1948, with its title acting as a modern metaphor for the individual isolation of man), the novelist/philosopher wrote that with this isolation, “no one had hitherto been seen to smile in public” (1948, p. 271).

Along similar subtextual lines Keaton appears headed towards a comically whimsical tone in a 1926 *Ladies Home Journal* article chronicling some of the worldwide nicknames attached to his screen persona. Yet, then comes the existentialistic-like pay-off:

No one as yet has given me authentic translations [for my figure’s nicknames] but I imagine that most of these [character] names of endearment signify null and void, and their combined meaning, if totaled up, would equal zero (1926, p. 174).

Boom! There it is. Keaton’s feelings/curiosity towards his persona were as emotionless as his *deadpan* face. In Camus’ *The Stranger* (a name which could be applied to sphinx-like Keaton), the novelist’s title character is executed not so much for having killed someone but rather for having shown no sentiment. One is immediately reminded of Keaton’s seemingly heartless murder of a cowboy early in *The Frozen North* (1922), his short subject parody of Western star William S. Hart. This is especially apt here, because it is not readily apparent the killing is a dream-driven spoof. In contrast to Keaton embracing this “Zero” perspective, think about Chaplin affectionately referencing his anti-hero as “The Little Fellow” in the voice-over for his tweaked 1942 re-issuing



of *The Gold Rush*. This Chaplin moniker for the Tramp is an emotional “heart on his sleeve” drawing love as much as he projects it. As *Photoplay*’s January 1928 review of Chaplin’s *The Circus* observed, “[Comedy is] a gag, of course, but a typical Chaplin gag [is] touched with humor and humanness ... that is the secret of [his] human interest plot, which will hold your attention to the end of the story” (1928, p. 45). Thus, if Chaplin’s antihero emotionally speaks to one’s idealized better half, Keaton’s “Zero” targets the reality of cerebral cynicism –clashing an antihero as a cipher is fundamental existentialism.

This is why trains are so central to Keaton’s art, whether in the delightfully absurd-looking (yet based on reality) *Our Hospitality* (1923) locomotive which begs to be called a children’s “choo choo”, or the title-billed iron horse of *The General*. For Keaton and comedy, trains and/or the mechanical object in general, provide a greater insight into his comedy. In Luis Buñuel’s 1927 review of *College*, the surrealist perceptively wrote, “Keaton arrives at comedy through direct harmony with objects” (Buñuel, 1975, p. 273). This meshes with Buster’s Keaton’s other-worldly minimalist face. Keaton has an organic connection with mechanical props, especially large ones. Grounded in a childhood in which he was used as “human map”, his antiheroic persona is grounded in human beings as undependable, whereas a cared-for mechanical object is stable and unfailing. Like the neglected period paintings of Gerald Murphy, such as the *Watch* (1925, which fittingly for Keaton shows the interior workings of a *railroad* pocket watch), mechanically-connected subjects suggest a sanctuary from human hurt... for an individual damaged through failed personal relationships.

In contrast, the rare mechanical object in Chaplin showcases comic human frustration, failure and easy relatability to the viewer, such as his taking apart a broken alarm clock in the early short subject, *The Pawnshop* (1916). Before ultimately reducing it to a pile of seemingly unrelated metal objects, he creates a metamorphic magic show for this doomed-from-the-start “operation”. Indeed, his first act is along medical lines. He produces a stethoscope to check for a heart rate. Along the way he will drill into the clock as if it is a safe, subject it to a can opener as if preparing beans for supper, and eventually examine the scrambled insides with something resembling a jeweler’s magnifying eye-piece –either for a solution, or to discover something of value. He



then returns it to the customer with an expression that, if verbalized, would best borrow a phrase from Dudley Moore's antiheroic title role in 1981's *Arthur*, after also failing to fix something – "It's a goner". Of course, if one then flashes forward twenty years to 1936's *Modern Times*, Chaplin's antihero is quite literally swallowed by a giant machine and has a nervous breakdown. This attack on the dehumanization of a mechanized world, inspired by Henry Ford's creation of the first mass assembly line, again puts Chaplin and Keaton in different antiheroic camps.

While Keaton was busy growing up as "Zero", Chaplin's equally persona-producing childhood was also an act of survival. But while Buster's was an apprenticeship in existentialistic absurdity, which was a box office hit, Chaplin's was often as a street kid in search of love, whose father had abandoned the family and whose mother (Hannah) was slowly losing her mind. But in her periods of lucidity she was a loving parent to Chaplin and his older half-brother Sydney.

Hannah was once a London music hall singer. But when her career ground to a halt, she attempted to support her boys as a seamstress and part-time nurse. Though they were barely getting by, Hannah attempted to maintain a happy front for the children. Besides playfully reviving romanticized shtick from her days on the stage, she could perfectly mimic the passing parade of people viewed from their tenement garret window (the address changed often as they could afford less and less). Regardless, these ongoing comic tutorials provided invaluable lessons for the future films of cinema's greatest pantomime artist. Chaplin was later most generous in crediting his talent and general mindset to his mother:

I learned from her everything I know. She was the most astounding mimic I had ever saw [sic] ... It was in watching and observing her that I learned not only to translate motions with my hands and features but also to study mankind (Minney, 1954, p. 6). (Though now often forgotten, Sydney was also a successful silent film comedian).

When Chaplin was barely six, Hannah began suffering bouts of mental instability, which necessitated a sort of revolving door relationship with mental institutions. This sometimes meant the boys had to work at parenting their



mother, as well as just getting by. For Hannah, what had begun with severe headaches reached chronic psychotic dimensions by 1898, when she was admitted to London's Lambeth Infirmary. In a horribly ironic twist upon being a praised mimic, she was eventually diagnosed with "the great mimic" disorder—that era's phrase for syphilis, before the Wasserman test was developed⁵. (The medical aphorism came from the fact that the disease could imitate other medical problems). How she contracted syphilis will probably never be known, though the need to provide for her children might have pushed her into part-time prostitution, the Victorian era fate of approximately twenty to twenty-five percent of London's female population.

Already like a child from a Dickens novel, young Charlie would now become more familiar with a series of institutions programmed to care for orphaned or abandoned children. The boys even experienced the wrath of fairy tale literature's proverbial wicked stepmother when Charlie and Sydney briefly stayed with Charles Sr. and his mistress—who, with a child of her own and an increasingly alcoholic mate, had no time or inclination for extra duties. Even then, Charlie seldom saw his father, with prominent entertainer Charles Sr. coming home late, if at all, after a music hall night of performing and drinking with the customers—an unfortunate practice strongly encouraged by management.

No wonder Chaplin would observe late in his life, "... to judge the morals of our family by commonplace standards would be as erroneous as putting a thermometer in boiling water" (Weissman, 1996, p. 75). Sympathetic fallen women are often a fixture in Chaplin's movies, including the post-Tramp picture *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947, with Marilyn Nash playing the streetwalker). Needless to say, however, Chaplin's antiheroic films of the 1920s and for much of his career in general, are full of idealized sympathetic women often in need of the Tramp's help—a stark contrast with the often less than understanding Keaton cinema counterparts.

Consequently, like Dickens' writings, Chaplin's antiheroic Tramp films, especially *The Kid*, are infused with a social conscience and a stylized real-

⁵ See both Stephan M. Weissman's essay "Charlie Chaplin's Film Heroines", *Film History* (Indiana University Press), 8(4), as well as Weissman's book *Chaplin: A Life* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2008), which includes an Introduction by the comedian's daughter, Geraldine Chaplin.



ism. In many ways “The Little Fellow” continued to highlight the important social issues of the novelist’s heyday, most specifically keying upon poverty and all its related ills, such as the abused and/or neglected child, things Chaplin had experienced first-hand. After all, the comedian’s antiheroic character was that of a Tramp, who rescued the abandoned baby of *The Kid*, or the mistreated and abused young heroine of *The Circus*. (One should also remember that even Dickens created the empathetic prostitute Nancy of *Oliver Twist*, 1837-1839, a serialized novel).

Given all these factors, especially the tragic and complex nature of Chaplin’s relationship with his beloved mother, is it any wonder that the antiheroic yet often child-like Tramp often assumes a parental nature with a needy supporting player? The range is immense from the aforementioned baby, to the blind flower girl, of *City Lights* (1931, a production started in 1927). Plus, given the multi-faceted, often *rags to riches* nature of the Dickensian world, here was another factor which was true of Chaplin’s real life, his films frequently had unlikely happy endings. Though Chaplin’s movies will become progressively darker after 1930, his Tramp antiheroes will usually continue to use comedy to fight for progressive social issues. Given this humanistic agenda for change, Chaplin’s screen alter ego during the silent era has at least one foot in a stylized realism.

Consequently, Chaplin’s 1920s world view provides another difference between his antihero and that of Keaton’s. With the latter figure’s “Zero” stuck in a Theatre of the Absurd world, surrealistic events are a common experience, such as his tired *Sherlock, Jr.* (1924) projectionist falling asleep and entering the film within the film. Years later, this inspired Woody Allen to reverse the process and have Mia Farrow’s screen hero exit another movie within a movie during 1985’s *Purple Rose of Cairo*. However, even Buster’s cinema “reality” is often surrealistic, and one is not just speaking of entering movies, or *Go West*’s cow entanglement. In *The Navigator* (1924) he dons a spaceman-like diving suit and has the most amazing adventure. A particularly impressed period reviewer for the *Los Angeles Times* observed:

Down there Buster uses one swordfish as weapon to fight a dual with another swordfish... He puts up a sign... “Dangerous, Men at Work”. When the job is done, while he is still at the bottom..., he fills a bucket with water



and washes his hands –and then empties the bucket! He uses a lobster which catches his leg to cut a wire, and he does other things equally funny... And there's an eerie minute full of thrills when he has a fight with an octopus... (Kingsley, 1924).

However, the signature scene for this swashbuckling underwater Douglas Fairbanks is when he must walk out of the ocean. Buster's antihero suddenly surfacing in his seaweed-adorned diving suit, is like a cross between a soggy extraterrestrial and *The Creature From the Black Lagoon* (1954).

As a brief addendum, this whole sequence no doubt was the catalyst for the Keaton-loving Salvador Dali to wear a deep sea diving suit, just like Buster's, at London's 1936 "International Exhibition of Surrealism". There have been past tangential references sometimes vaguely linking Keaton's film and Dali's stunt –but it had to have been *this* bizarre exit from the sea which caused Dali to also attempt a lecture in such a suit at the conference. Indeed, even Dali's 1936 artwork seems to second this hypothesis, such as his *Lobster Telephone* from that year –which was a box cradle and a lobster for a receiver. Of course, as a whimsical tongue-in-cheek observation from a student of the absurd, maybe lobsters open-for-comic-transformation make them a subtextual existentialistic basic. For example, when Jean-Paul Sartre tried mescaline, he believed he was being followed by lobster-like beings.

The surrealist world of Keaton's antihero is often dependent upon formalist filmmaking tricks, such as seemingly entering a movie screen, or the equally unique short subject *The Playhouse* (1921), in which Buster's "Zero" plays every character in the picture. Through an elaborate masking of the camera lens into narrow slits, and the countless back winding of the film to expose film footage of a different Buster by a *hand-cranked* camera, he is able to play a nine-man minstrel show, the pit musicians, and the entire audience! It will take a much more technically savvy Hollywood to match it when Oscar Levant plays all the parts in a Gershwin gala from *An American in Paris* (1951), or John Malkovich goes through a portal into his own mind and arrives at a chic café where he also plays everyone in the aptly named *Being John Malkovich* (1999). Ironically these exercises in multiplicity diminish the uniqueness of the individual and make the "Zero" moniker all the more appropriate for Keaton, or these other figures.



Chaplin the filmmaker is much more interested in testing his antihero in the real world of long takes and full shots, which emphasize he is indeed doing what he seems to be doing. The most pivotal statement on this remains Andre Bazin's essay, "The Virtues and Limitations of Montage", in which he rescues Chaplin from being considered a technically limited artist. Thus, the close to this piece remains the seminal statement on how less was more for Chaplin's antihero:

.... his gags derived from a comedy of space, from the relation of man to things and to the surrounding world. In *The Circus* Chaplin is truly in the lion's cage and both are enclosed within the framework of the screen (Bazin, 1958, p. 52).

Traditional editing or special effects would have distracted from the amazing mime of Chaplin. For that same reason, Fred Astaire used long takes and full shots to underline that he and his celebrated partner Ginger Rogers were actually doing it all –no "montage musical" here, à la later pictures like 1983's *Flashdance*, in which Jennifer Beal's dancing was largely created via editing and a body double.

Finally, the antiheroes of Chaplin and Keaton struggled along on canvases of a radically different size. Keaton was more than capable of scaled-down pantomime, such as his gifted ability to reproduce every tick of both a baseball pitcher and a batter in *The Cameraman* (1928). Yet, even here, the giant backdrop of an empty Yankee Stadium ultimately sells the sequence. Consequently, Keaton's antihero uses the world as his often dangerous backdrop, whether it is playing dodgeball with an avalanche of rocks in *Seven Chances* (1925), or fighting a tornado and a flood in 1928's *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* –with his immortal gravity-defying walk into a gale.

Such a large milieu often necessitated sizeable props, from his ever-present trains, especially in *Our Hospitality* and *The General*, to the diverse ships of *The Navigator* and *Steamboat, Jr.* –able to tackle either an ocean, or the giant Mississippi. And with the world as a backdrop, full of mammoth mechanical objects, or massive living stampedes of women (*Seven Chances*) or cattle (*Go West*), Keaton's long-shot, full-figure antihero was often reduced



to his mesmerizing “Zero”. And if one did see that “Great Stone Face”, that same number still came to mind.

In contrast, Chaplin’s antihero played to a small room, such as the aforementioned *Pawnshop* alarm clock, or the delightful dance of the dinner rolls in *The Gold Rush*. But there are so many other examples to choose from, such as the torn bedcover which the Tramp so naturally transforms into a robe in *The Kid*, and the same film showing a quick check of Jackie Coogan’s hygiene before eating, or coaching him in the boxing sequence. *The Gold Rush* seems to pile on one after another: dancing while being accidentally tied to a dog, his joyful feather pillow-bursting sequence, pretending to be frozen stiff as a board, attempting to stay balanced in a cabin tilting over an abyss, and so on. And *The Circus*, while not his greatest film, is certainly his most amusing: the various fun house mirror scenes, pretending to be a mechanical figure, ruining the various magic acts by accidentally revealing the tricks, and trying to balance on a tightrope with a monkey’s tail in your mouth.

These then are the two antiheroic visions of Chaplin and Keaton, which again reflect the spirit of their characters. With the Tramp there is the emotional intimacy of a small space which begs for love. With Keaton it seems more about survival in an oversized world and the paradox that mechanical things are more dependable than people, or as critic Alexis Soloski (2017) said of a David Monet play: “... there is longtime distrust of the human heart and human institution...”.

Who knows, maybe the differences just spring from early settings for two struggling children. Chaplin savors the precious fleeting moments with an entertaining mother at a garret window, while Keaton bemoans parents who used him as a “human mop” as he looks out a train window while going to an endless list of abusive vaudeville bookings.

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⁶ A pictorial magazine not be confused with an earlier humor publication with the same name.



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⁷ In conversations and correspondence with the author, particularly a letter dated December 10, 1979, in which Capra reframes the influence of Schwejk on Langdon from the director's memoir.



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⁸ *LIFE* was the satirical rival to *The New Yorker*, and should not be confused with the later pictorial *LIFE* in which James Agee's "Comedy's Greatest Era" appeared. See note 6.

